GOOD AND BETTER

One passage in the book of Hebrews seems to teach that the spirits of just men went to heaven when they died. In this lesson we will put this standard Protestant view of the passage to careful scrutiny in order to determine if that interpretation is correct. Here is the passage with some explanatory notes of the verbs in the passage:

“But you have come [perfect tense, active voice] to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the first-born, whose names are [better: “have been,” perfect tense, passive voice] written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made [better: “that have been made,” perfect tense, passive voice] perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb. 12:22–24, NIV).

The writer of the book of Hebrews was dealing with a specific problem—Jews who had embraced Christianity were about to give it up and return to what they considered the riches of Judaism. With nostalgia they remembered that they once had the glorious city of Jerusalem with its resplendent temple, the priesthood, the fathers, the covenants, and the promises. And now what did they have? Nothing but opposition and persecution!

The writer of the book attempted to persuade the Hebrews to persevere. He pointed out that although the Old Testament system was good, the New Testament was better.
Read Hebrews 11 and 12:18–24 from the translation of your choice. Write out Hebrews 12:18–24. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
IN HEAVEN BUT ON EARTH

This passage (Heb. 12:18–24) does not say that the Hebrews would come to the heavenly Mount Zion/New Jerusalem in the future. They had already come there while still living on earth! The Hebrews were worshiping in the heavenly Jerusalem, where the names of the members of the church of the firstborn had been registered and the spirits of the righteous had been made perfect. The question is, How could the living Hebrews worship in heaven where the spirits of the righteous had been made perfect while they still lived on earth? Evangelical scholar George Eldon Ladd, in his book, The Presence of the Future, argued persuasively that Christians can even now enjoy the blessings of the future (The Presence of the Future: The Eschatology of Biblical Realism [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974]). Christians can now eat the heavenly Manna (John 6:48–51), drink water from the Rock (John 4:13, 14; 7:37–39), and come boldly to the throne of grace (Heb. 4:15).

The members of the church of the firstborn were not physically worshiping in heaven. They were there because their names had been “registered” or recorded in heaven (cf. Luke 2:3, 5; 10:20). Paul wrote that even now we are seated with Christ in heavenly places although we are physically on earth (Eph. 2:6). Though we live on earth, our citizenship is in heaven (Phil. 3:20, 21).

Who are the “spirits” in this passage? We have pointed out that the “spirit” is the life record of the believer that is recorded in the heavenly books. “The spirit, the character of man, is returned to God, there to be preserved” (Ellen G. White, Ellen G. White Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, vol. 6 [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1956], 1093).

Who are the “just men”? The word men is not in the Greek text. The text simply reads, “to the spirits of the righteous made perfect.” The word men is absent because women appear in the list of Old Testament heroes in Hebrews 11. Each of these persons accomplished their feats by faith in the righteousness of Christ, and their names are registered in heaven. Hebrews 11:4 refers to Abel as “righteous,” and Hebrews 11:7 tells us that Noah became an heir of the “righteousness that is by faith.” James wrote that both Rahab and Abraham were justified by faith (James 2:23, 25).

What is the meaning of the expression “made perfect”? In order to answer this question, we must first study the phrase as it relates to Christ. In His case, the term does not refer to moral perfection of character. The sense is that the OT sacrifices were incomplete—not perfect—because they could not legally save sinners; the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin (Heb. 10:4). The word perfect describes the work that Jesus needed to accomplish in order to become our complete—perfect—Savior. The life and death of Jesus qualified or “perfected” Him to legally perfect the life record—or spirit—of the Old Testament saints.
PERFECTING THE LIFE RECORD

In previous lessons we noticed that the “spirit” is the breath with the life record that God stores in heavenly books to be returned at the resurrection. Somehow, during the OT period, the life records of the righteous dead were not “perfect.” Why? Simply because Jesus had not yet come. By His life and death, Jesus became “perfect” or qualified to legally perfect or qualify them for salvation.

Hebrews 7–10 tells us that the OT sacrificial system could not legally perfect or qualify the OT believers for salvation. The Levitical priesthood made nothing perfect because it merely pointed forward to a better hope (Heb. 7:11, 19). The OT system could not make the worshiper’s conscience perfect because it “was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience concerned only with foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed until the time of reformation” (Heb. 9:9, 10, emphasis supplied). However, Jesus legally forgave the sins of the heroes of faith and made their “spirit” (life record) perfect because He came not “with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood,” and thus obtained “eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12).

Hebrews 10:1–4, 11, 12, 14, draws a contrast between the Old and the New. The ceremonial system could not perfect those who approached, because the blood of bulls and goats could not legally take away sin. After offering animal blood, the worshipers would still be conscious of their sins. However, by one offering of better blood, Jesus “perfected forever” those who are “being sanctified.”

The life record of the OT saints was not perfect, because Jesus the reality, had not yet come: “And all these, having obtained a good testimony through faith, did not receive the promise” (Heb. 11:39). The OT heroes could not be perfected without or apart from the NT Christians: “God having provided something better for us that they should not be made perfect apart from us” (Heb. 10:40, emphasis supplied). What is this “something better”? The book of Hebrews provides the answer. The OT heroes lived in the period of shadows, while the immediate audience of the book of Hebrews lived in the time of the reality toward which those shadows pointed!

We are now ready to understand Hebrews 12:24. Most Bible versions assume that this text contrasts the shed blood of Abel with the shed blood of Jesus. The words “the blood of” are inserted into the text. Animal blood could not legally take away sin, but the blood of Christ does! Albert Barnes captured the proper sense: “The meaning here is, that the blood of Jesus speaks better things than Abel did; that is, that the blood of Jesus is the ‘reality’ of which the offering of Abel was a ‘type.’ ”

1. From Barnes’ Notes, Electronic Database Copyright © 1997–2014 by Biblesoft, Inc. All rights reserved.
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Deuteronomy 34:5, 6 with Jude 9
Hebrews 5:7–9
Hebrews 9:9–12
Hebrews 10:1–4, 11, 12, 14
Romans 3:25, 26

What other verses come to mind in connection with Hebrews 11; 12:18–24?

THE BATTLE OVER THE BODY OF MOSES

The late Evangelical writer Robert Morey was quite certain that “the spirits of just men” were the departed souls of OT saints:

In this glorious picture described by the author, the earthly saints join in the worship which resounds from the myriads of angels and disembodied spirits of fellow saints who have departed this life. These saints were justified through faith while on earth and are now perfected and completed in heaven. That the author is describing the blest condition of departed saints who now worship God before the throne is so clear that we must agree with the commentators that it cannot be questioned or doubted. . . . The “spirits of justified men now perfected” who are worshiping at God’s throne are obviously conscious souls of believers during the intermediate state. (Robert A. Morey, Death and the Afterlife [Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1984], 213, emphasis supplied.)

Are the “spirits of the righteous” really the “disembodied spirits” and “conscious souls” of the departed? To answer this question, let’s take the case of Moses, one of the notable heroes of Hebrews 11. After God buried Moses (Deut. 34:5, 6), there was a mighty dispute over his body between Michael the Archangel (cf. 1 Thess. 4:16; Dan. 12:1, 2; Rev. 12:7–9) and the devil (Jude 9). Do Jesus and the devil fight over corpses? Of course not! Michael had come to resurrect Moses, and Satan contested His right to do so. We know that Michael won the battle because Moses appeared to Jesus in glory on the Mount of Transfiguration fourteen centuries later. Nowhere does the transfiguration text say that the “spirit” or “soul” of Moses spoke with Jesus on the Mount.

Satan claimed that Moses was his because he had sinned when he killed the Egyptian and struck the rock twice. In the OT period, Jesus had not yet legally paid the price for the redemption of Moses. For this reason, Moses (and Elijah) talked with Jesus “of His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (cf. Luke 9:30, 31). Moses and Elijah were sent by the Father to encourage Jesus to go forward with the redemption plan. The life record or “spirit” of Moses had not yet been “made perfect” because the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sin. When Jesus died on the cross, the life record (“spirit”) of Moses was made perfect!

Paul alluded to this in Romans 3:25, 26, where he wrote that Jesus offered Himself as a propitiation for our sins to “demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance, God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”
**inSight**

Review the memory verse. How does it apply to your life this week?

After this week's study of the chapter, what hit you personally?

What can be applied to other areas of your life?

---

**BEHOLDER THAN THE BLOOD OF ABEL**

But the great truth that was to be kept before men, and imprinted upon mind and heart, was this, “Without shedding of blood is no remission.” In every bleeding sacrifice was typified “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.” Christ Himself was the originator of the Jewish system of worship, in which, by types and symbols, were shadowed forth spiritual and heavenly things. Many forgot the true significance of these offerings; and the great truth that through Christ alone there is forgiveness of sin, was lost to them. The multiplying of sacrificial offerings, the blood of bulls and goats, could not take away sin. (Ellen G. White, “Chosen in Christ,” *The Signs of the Times* [Pacific Press Publishing Company, 1874], Jan. 2, 1893.)

Christ was the foundation of the whole Jewish economy. The death of Abel was in consequence of Cain's refusing to accept God's plan in the school of obedience to be saved by the blood of Jesus Christ typified by the sacrificial offerings pointing to Christ. Cain refused the shedding of blood which symbolized the blood of Christ to be shed for the world. This whole ceremony was prepared by God, and Christ became the foundation of the whole system. This is the beginning of its work as the schoolmaster to bring sinful human agents to a consideration of Christ the Foundation of the whole Jewish economy. (Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 1 [Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958], 233.)

He who spilled His blood for us, lives to plead it, lives to make intercession for every soul who receives Him. “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin. It speaketh better things than the blood of Abel, for Christ ever liveth to make intercession for us. We need to keep ever before us the efficacy of the blood of Jesus. That life-cleansing, life-sustaining blood, appropriated by living faith, is our hope. We need to grow in appreciation of its inestimable value, for it speaks for us only as we by faith claim its virtue, keeping the conscience clean and at peace with God. (Ellen G. White, *Ellen G. White Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7 [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1957], 948.)

The law requires righteousness,—a righteous life, a perfect character; and this man has not to give. He cannot meet the claims of God's holy law. But Christ, coming to the earth as man, lived a holy life, and developed a perfect character. These He offers as a free gift to all who will receive them. His life stands for the life of men. Thus they have remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God. More than this, Christ imbues men with the attributes of God. He builds up the human character after the similitude of the divine character, a goodly fabric of spiritual strength and beauty. Thus the very righteousness of the law is fulfilled in the believer in Christ. God can “be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.” Romans 3:26. (Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1898], 762.)
Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

What is the meaning of the word *perfect* in Hebrews, and why couldn’t the old sanctuary service make persons perfect?

How is a biblical definition of perfection better than its popular understanding?

In what sense were the “spirits” of these just persons made perfect when Christ died on the cross?

How does the “perfecting” of Jesus in Hebrews help us understand the “spirits made perfect”?

Romans 3:25, 26 tells us that God “passed over” the sins that were committed during the Old Testament period. How does this help us understand the “spirits made perfect”?

According to Hebrews 10:40, God provides something better for those who live in the New Testament period than for those who lived before. What is the “something better” (see Heb. 9:11, 12; 10:4)?

The Spirits of Just Men